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Identity Formation- Influences that shape beginning teachers' professional identity- Crossing the border from pre-service to in-service teacher.

Denise MacGregor
University of South Australia
 Email: Denise.MacGregor@unisa.edu.au

Abstract

The influences that shape beginning teachers' professional identity have been described as part of a changing landscape (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999). When pre-service teachers transition into the role of beginning in-service teachers the landscape changes dramatically. Aspects or features of the landscape that were once familiar may be confirmed or challenged. As beginning teachers navigate the changing landscape, *'they cross spatial (physical experiences) and temporal (of the mind/conceptual) borders'* (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999: 112) and in doing so shape their professional identity.

This paper reports on the findings of the initial stage of a doctoral study that examined the influences that final year pre-service teachers believed would shape their professional identity once they crossed the border and commenced their role as in-service teachers. The first stage of the study involved twenty final year Design and Technology pre-service teachers in focus group discussions to investigate personal perceptions of professional identity; to identify factors that had shaped this perception to date; and to predict future influences.

The findings demonstrated that while final year pre-service teachers were prepared to approach their in-service role with a high level of enthusiasm and confidence in their subject knowledge, they feared perceived challenges such as a lack of mentoring support from teaching colleagues, the perceptions of students, and under valuing the place of Design and Technology Education in the curriculum (including food and textile technology) by school leadership could have a negative impact on shaping their professional identity. These challenges became the spatial and temporal borders that pre-service teachers believed they would need to navigate.

Such findings suggest that pre-service teachers are well aware that aspects of the professional landscape will be challenging. The implication for teacher education programs is to provide pre-service teachers with strategies to cross the borders successfully.

Defining Professional Identity

Researchers have come to see professional identity as an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society (Rust, 1994; Gee, 2001; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). One issue for this study was to formulate a definition of identity that could be viewed as operational. Professional identity in this study is not viewed as something that is fixed. This study recognises that the professional identity of a pre-service teacher will be in a state of transition and will be constantly created and recreated through experiences and interactions with people (Holland & Lave, 2003; Bauman, 1996; Roth, 2004). These interactions and experiences could challenge or confirm pre-service teachers' perceptions of professional identity. This study also recognises that beginning in-service teachers are active agents who can play a decisive role in shaping their professional identity as they reflect on experiences, interactions with others and on their knowledge of teaching (Sfard & Prusak 2005).

One can also equate professional identity with '*stories about persons*', (Sfard & Prusak 2005:14). That is the stories we tell others and the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. This narrative rendering of professional identity is also reflected in the work of Connelly and Clandinin (1999) who suggest that our identities are the stories we live by. It is the literature of Connelly and Clandinin (1987, 1999); Clandinin and Connelly, (1995, 1998, 2000); Clandinin, (2007) in the field of professional identity and narrative inquiry that provides the operational definition for this study as they argue that it is the interconnectedness of our experiences, place, and knowledge that merge to become our identity, our narrative or story to live by. Therefore, this study is situated in an ontology of experience. (Clandinin, 2007).

Influences that shape beginning teachers Professional Identity

The influences that shape beginning teachers professional identity have been described as part of a changing landscape (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999). When pre-service teachers transition into the role of beginning in-service teachers the landscape changes dramatically. The influences that shape professional identity in this study are seen as being, '*ongoing and part of a performative process*' (Watson, 2006:509).

More specifically, professional identity in this study is viewed as relational, temporal and continuous (Clandinin, 2007). Relational because professional identity can be influenced by the social and cultural constructs of others in specific contexts; temporal in the sense that, narratives can capture perceptions of professional identity at a particular moment in time and continuous because professional identity changes in response to life and professional experiences. The following section of this paper provides an overview of the literature that explores the influences that shape beginning teachers professional identity and commences with the influence of social constructs of the past.

Influences from the Past

Personal and Professional Histories

When pre-service teachers commence their University study they bring with them varied narratives about who they believe they will become as teachers (Knowles, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Smith, 2003; Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2007). The narratives of professional identity that they hold have been shaped by a range of social, political and educational constructs (Flores & Day, 2006). Hence these narratives reflect influences of the past, the present and perhaps a vision for the future.

The literature also suggests that the narratives of professional identity that beginning pre-service teachers bring to their study are diverse, a result in some instances of the changing profile of those entering the field of education (Mayer, 2006). A growing percentage of pre-service teachers who commence study are mature age or 'career switchers' (Richardson & Watt, 2006) and the memories they hold of teaching are from some time ago. More specifically in Design and Technology education many mature age pre-service teachers draw on their life experiences (such as technical and trades backgrounds) to inform their professional identity (Bussey, Dormody & Leeuwen, 2000: cited in Smith 2003). Many pre-service teachers also bring with them a strong memory of how they were taught (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2007). Commencing pre-service teachers also cite the influence of past teachers as a reason for their decision to become a teacher.

Influences of the future

Teaching Contexts - School Cultures

Schools as socially produced and culturally constructed contexts can be viewed as places that provide specific histories, experiences and knowledge that can shape the stories that tell others who we are (Sloan, 2006). The literature (Reynolds, 1996; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Rust, 1994; Fetherson, 2006) argues that beginning teachers need to become familiar with the school and teaching cultures as it is these cultures that determine to a large extent the stories of individual teachers, including the way they perceive their professional identity. Reynolds identifies schools, *'as workplace landscapes that are related to teachers' identities by cultural scripts which prescribe what they think and do'* (Reynolds, 1996; cited in Beijaard et al., 2000: 4). That is, Reynolds is arguing that the school environment itself, including school leadership, teachers, students and the wider school community, are just as strong a determinant in shaping professional identity as the individual.

The literature argues further that schools and classrooms play an important role in, *'reframing prior conceptions of self as teacher and in re-defining new teachers' professional identity by making choices and decisions that actively locate them in a particular context'* (Coldron & Smith, 1999: 714). Similar views are advanced by Fieman-Nemser (2001) and Fetherston (2006) who argue that beginning teachers make a transition through a series of stages, the first two being induction and competency building. During these early stages of transition, familiarising one-self with the responsibilities of teaching in a specific context is of paramount importance in developing a sense of self as teacher.

The Emotional Work of Teaching

Britzman argues that teaching is an emotional process and suggests that when teachers commence teaching they find that, *'one of the greatest surprises in learning how to teach is how deeply an emotional experience it is'* (Britzman, 2003:22). When discussing the nature of the emotional work of beginning teachers, Groundwater-Smith et al. cite issues such as the overwhelming sense of being on your own as teachers take responsibility for planning, teaching, establishing class routines, developing professional relationships with students, dealing with inappropriate behaviour etc. Groundwater-Smith et al., also acknowledge that the intensity of

teachers' emotional work can increase if beginning teachers are placed in schools of severe disadvantage or isolation, or in schools, '*where the beginning teachers' background and culture is very different from the prevailing culture*' (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2007:115).

Professional Knowledge- Subject Knowledge and Pedagogy

For the last two decades there has been considerable research (Gossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989; McNamara, 1991) into the forms of knowledge that teachers, including beginning Design and Technology teachers (Leach & Banks, 1996; Moon & Banks, 1996; Banks & Barlex, 2000) require to perform their role. Current research argues that there is a need to recognise that professional knowledge and the role of the beginning teacher cannot be reduced to technical or instrumental action (Beijaard et al., 2000).

Banks and Barlex argue that beginning Design and Technology teachers need to develop their own *Personal Subject construct*, which they suggest is,

'A complex amalgam of past knowledge, experiences of learning, a personal view of what constitutes 'good' teaching and a belief in the purposes of the subject and an understanding of students as learners'.

(Banks & Barlex, 2000:7)

This view enables the teacher's role to move beyond that of transmitter of knowledge (Beijaard et al., 2000; Staples 2003) to one of facilitator of learning.

Educational Change in Design and Technology Education

An important context for this study is that the field of Design and Technology education is currently involved in a process of paradigm change (Pavlova & Smith 2003). Central to this change is a move away from specific skilling or the transmission of subject specific know-how (Staples 2003), known as Manual Arts or Technical Studies, to a more general educational, and holistic approach characterised by a core of capabilities and values that involve the development of higher order thinking processes. Such an approach engages students in processes of analysis, design and critique.

Pre-service teachers in this study therefore could be identified as the ‘new generation’ of Design and Technology educators. That is, through their recent University studies, they have been introduced to and supported in developing a holistic understanding of Design and Technology Education that moves away from the more traditional notions of skilling currently implemented in many Australian Secondary schools.

This section of the paper presented an overview of the literature that explored some of the influences that shape beginning teachers’ professional identity. As pre-service teachers transition into the role of in-service teacher their professional identity will be shaped by influences of the past and the present. The experiences and interactions that become part of this transition become the special and temporal borders that will challenge or confirm pre-service teachers’ perceptions of professional identity.

The Study

The aim of this study is to examine the influences that final year pre-service teachers perceived would interweave to shape their professional identity as they crossed the border to commence their role as in-service teachers. To achieve a rich and detailed portrayal of pre-service teachers’ perceptions a qualitative orientation to the research is adopted. Creswell (1998), Berg (2001), and Denzin and Lincoln (2003) identify a number of assumptions which underpin qualitative research: that reality is socially constructed and events need to be viewed from the multiple perspectives of the participants; that the researcher is an instrument of data collection who can have a close relationship with the participants but needs to explicitly acknowledge the value-laden nature of the study; that the detailed words of the participants are appropriate in reporting the study.

These assumptions are congruent with the circumstances and intentions of this study in that it will use narratives to focus on the perceptions of professional identity of the participants and that the researcher has to some degree been a participant in the shaping of participants’ professional identity, and so will need to acknowledge her own biases and values.

This study adopts narrative inquiry as a research method as such a method offers an interpretive reconstruction of parts of a person's life (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986). I argue that the adoption of a narrative inquiry approach for this study will enable participants, through the use of narratives, to organise and give meaning to their perceptions of professional identity and to the influences that shape these perceptions as they make the transition from pre-service to in-service teacher,

Participants

The participants for this study are twenty beginning Design and Technology pre-service teachers who were in the final weeks of a four year undergraduate Bachelor of Education program in the field of Secondary Design and Technology education. There were 12 males and 8 females, with 11 'career switchers' with an employment background in a field related to Design and Technology education.

Data Collection Instruments

The use of focus groups for this study reflects a view by the researcher that such a method can provide a dynamic in which participants learn from each other and develop ideas together (Jackson, 2003). This process will be greatly aided by an existing history of cohesion and group discussion as all the participants have undertaken their study in the same cohort. Focus groups were also implemented as they may lead to discussions that provide points of commonality, agreement or possibly raising of issues not previously considered by the researcher.

The study asked participants to participate in one focus group interview session of an hour in duration. Almost the entire cohort of students in the final year level (20 students) agreed to participate in the focus group interviews. Two focus group sessions each with ten participants were organised. Participants' anonymity was protected at all times with the use of pseudonyms and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.

The focus group interview questions were:

- What is your perception of your professional identity as a beginning Design and Technology teacher as you leave University?
- What do you believe are the factors that have shaped your professional identity to this point?
- What factors do you think will continue to influence this perception once you commence teaching?

Focus group discussions were transcribed from the audiotape. The discussions were coded and patterns and themes were identified.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed to identify personal perceptions of professional identity in terms of how they related to pre-service teachers' past experiences and to the experiences that they believed they would encounter once they commenced teaching. Factors that influenced perceptions of professional identity were also analysed in terms of external factors, such as the support, guidance and views of parents, friends and university peers, and the relationships they developed with teaching colleagues and students along with internal factors such as levels of self confidence and the ability to reflect on one's teaching practice.

Findings from the focus group discussions are presented in response to each of the research questions.

Question 1

What is your perception of your professional identity as a beginning Design and Technology teacher as you leave University?

There was limited certitude in participants' perceptions, with over 80% of responses being represented in the following sentiments, "*my professional identity is in the very early stages of development*" (P3) and "*I know who I am as a person but I am still experimenting with me as the teacher*" (P8). Participants viewed their identity as continually being shaped and influenced by their experiences.

Many participants felt they would be on a steep learning curve once they commenced teaching. *“I am going (into teaching) as a complete novice, ready to learn and listen to the advice I will be given”* (P2). This is not an unexpected response as the participants in this study are in a state of professional identity transition as they find themselves responding to new experiences, interaction with colleagues, students and the wider school community (Watson, 2006). The implication of Watson’s argument is that one should encourage pre-service teachers to think about identity as an ongoing process of identification.

It is of significance to note that many of the participants related their responses in terms of how others may perceive their identity rather than in terms of how they perceived their own identity. The ‘others’ were identified as school based colleagues and students. Participants were mindful of the *“high level of expectations from others”* (P17) and the *“pressure to provide students with the knowledge and experiences that they need”* (P 11). There was concern that *“how I perceive my role as a Design and Technology teacher will not be consistent with the roles and expectations of other teachers”* (P 6).

Such concerns are a reflection of the impact of the paradigm change (Pavlova & Smith 2003) that the field of Design and Technology education is currently experiencing. Pre-service teachers need to be supported in developing the capacity to exercise independence in shaping and maintaining their sense of self identity even when confronted by constant social suggestion (Billet & Pavlova, 2008).

Question 2

What do you believe are the factors that have shaped your professional identity to this point?

Not surprisingly, all participants identified the professional experience as the most significant factor in shaping their professional identity. The opportunity to observe and reflect on the practice of in-service teachers and to discuss issues related to curriculum, were cited as the major contributors to shaping professional identity.

As stated by one participant, *“Sometimes observing the practice of other teachers provided me with an insight into what I don’t want to become”* (P 8). Having the opportunity to teach enabled participants to, *“make mistakes and this in turn has enabled me to reflect on improving my teaching to become a better teacher”* (P 14).

University course content and the teaching pedagogy introduced and modelled by University lecturers were identified as shaping factors by participants, particularly those who were identified as ‘career switchers’ (Richardson & Watt, 2006).

“I have identified role modelling of the Uni tutors because as for someone like myself, who has not been in a school for a long time this was my first experience back in a classroom situation” (P17).

While acknowledging the impact of University study, participants also identified their past experiences, maturity and previous work experience, *“Obviously Uni has been a major thing, but to me also being older shapes your beliefs about society and how education could be, you want to set your students up for success in life...it is this sort of belief that forms the sort of teacher you want to be”* (P 10).

Although not as frequently identified, the support, guidance and views of parents, friends and university peers were acknowledged as important.

Question 3

What factors do you think will continue to influence this perception once you commence teaching?

All participants believed that the development of supportive relationships with colleagues in schools would be the most significant factor in influencing professional identity once they commenced teaching. The need to feel *“valued and to be seen as an equal member of staff”* (P6, P1), and *“to be with colleagues who are positive and encouraging”* (P8) were identified as common themes.

Developing supportive relationships with colleagues were linked to developing self confidence in one’s own ability as well as leading to *“feelings of success or failure”* (P 17) and *‘personal and professional satisfaction’* (P6).

The perception and reaction of students to ones teaching were also identified as important in shaping professional identity.

“I think the reaction from students (to my teaching) will play a big part in influencing my professional identity,(for example) how you think the students are going, if they respond to the way you do things” (P11).

The need for personal critical reflection on one’s own classroom practice was also acknowledged. Participants identified the need to develop positive professional relationships with the students they taught as well as with the people they taught with.

Although participants felt they had a strong content knowledge base to draw upon, several were concerned about the unknown or unexpected, particularly when associated with student behaviour. They stated that their ability to respond, as well as how they might respond to the unexpected would have major implications in shaping how they were perceived by both students and teaching colleagues.

The majority of responses to the focus group questions were in terms of participants’ roles as educators and how well they felt they could meet the expectations of others (colleagues and students) to fulfil those roles. Participants identified themselves through their teaching abilities, connectedness to students, and ability to develop supportive professional relationships with staff. Professional identity was in many responses seen to be shaped by external factors which inturn influenced personal perceptions of identity. The responses reiterate Rust (1994); Flores and Day (2006) argument that beginning teachers are strongly affected by the conditions of the workplace and most particularly by the perceived need to accommodate the climate or culture established by the school leadership team and workplace colleagues.

While participants felt a sense of apprehension as they transitioned into their in-service teaching roles, there was also a sense of enthusiasm and preparedness as one participant suggests, “ *bring it on...I am ready!*”(P5).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to report on the findings of the initial stages of a doctoral study that examined the influences that final year pre-service teachers believe will shape their professional identity once they cross the border and commence their role as in-service teachers. To date, the findings of this research would suggest that the professional identity of pre-service teachers is not fixed but is in a state of transition and will be constantly created and recreated through experiences and interactions with people (Holland & Lave, 2003; Bauman, 1996 ; Roth, 2004). The findings also suggest that these interactions and experiences become the spatial and temporal borders that can challenge or confirm pre-service teacher's perceptions of professional identity. This is particularly the case for pre-service teachers in the field of Design and Technology education as they are viewed as the 'new generation' of Design and Technology educators. The next stage of this longitudinal study will revisit initial perceptions and continue to explore the influences that shape the professional identity of the pre-service teachers as they transition into in-service teaching roles.

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